



Day In Day Out

WELCOA'S ONLINE BULLETIN FOR YOUR LIFESTYLE

Feeling Stressed?

Stress Relief Might Help Your Health

Everyone feels stressed from time to time. Stress can give you a rush of energy when it's needed most—for instance, competing in sports, working on an important project, or facing a dangerous situation. The hormones and other chemicals released when under stress prepare you for action. You breathe faster, your heartbeat quickens, blood sugar rises to give you energy, and your brain uses more oxygen as it shifts into high alert.

But if stress lasts a long time—a condition known as chronic stress—those “high-alert” changes become harmful rather than helpful. “Stress clearly promotes higher levels of inflammation, which is thought to contribute to many diseases of aging. Inflammation has been linked to cardiovascular disease, diabetes, arthritis, frailty, and functional decline,” says Dr. Janice Kiecolt-Glaser, a leading stress researcher at Ohio State University. She and other researchers have found that stress affects the body's

immune system, which then weakens your response to vaccines and impairs wound healing.

What Science Says about Stress

Research has linked chronic stress to digestive disorders, urinary problems, headaches, sleep difficulties, depression, and anxiety.

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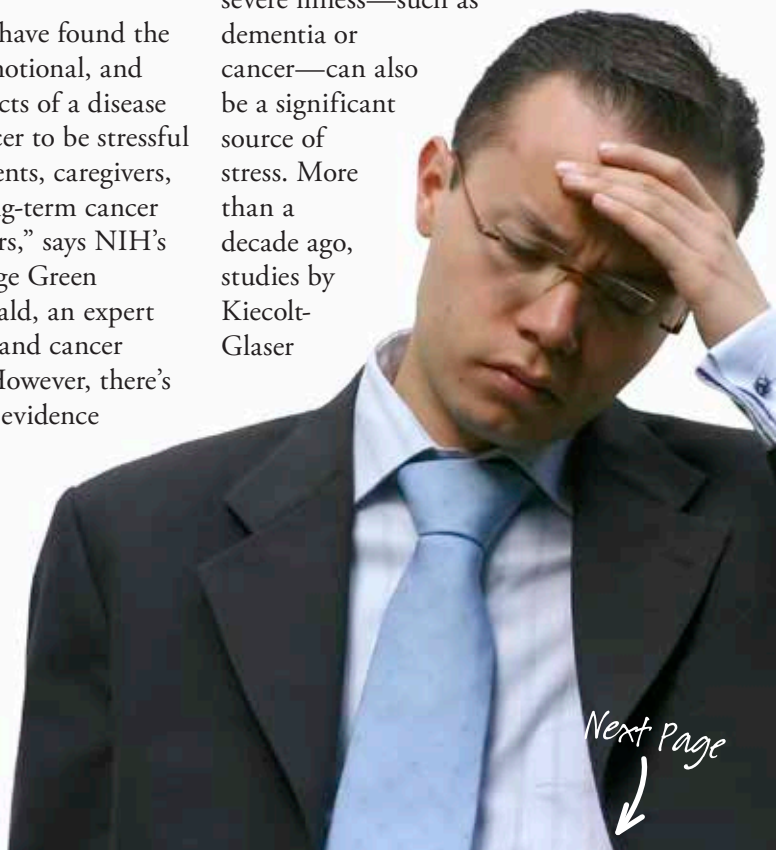
“Some studies have found the physical, emotional, and social effects of a disease like cancer to be stressful for patients, caregivers, and long-term cancer survivors,” says NIH's Dr. Paige Green McDonald, an expert on stress and cancer biology. “However, there's no definitive evidence

that stress causes cancer or is associated with how long one survives after a cancer diagnosis.”

The top causes of stress in the U.S. are money and work-related pressures,

according to a 2013 survey from the American Psychological Association. Stress can also arise from major life changes, such as the death of a loved one, divorce, illness, or losing a job. Traumatic stress is brought on by an extreme event such as a major accident, exposure to violence, or a natural disaster such as a hurricane or flood.

Caring for a person with severe illness—such as dementia or cancer—can also be a significant source of stress. More than a decade ago, studies by Kiecolt-Glaser



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and others showed that the stressful demands placed on caregivers can lead to poorer health, lower responses to vaccines, increased inflammation, and a more than 60% higher death rate compared to non-caregivers.

It's not clear why some people can sidestep or recover more quickly from stress than others. These resilient people seem to "bounce back" more easily after stressful situations. Recent studies of animals suggest that resiliency may depend at least in part on our genes. But learning healthy ways to cope with stress can also boost your resilience.

You may think that the agitation brought on by stress might help to burn

calories. But evidence hints that the opposite is more likely. Kiecolt-Glaser and colleagues found that, compared to nonstressed people, those who were stressed burned fewer calories after high-fat meals and they produced more of the hormone insulin, which enhances fat storage. "So stress may contribute to weight gain and obesity through these biological routes," Kiecolt-Glaser adds.

Getting enough sleep is also key to resilience and stress relief—although stress itself can interfere with sleep. To improve your sleep habits, go to bed the same time each night and get up the same time each morning, and limit the use of light-emitting electronics like computers and smartphones before bed.

The light can reduce production of a natural sleep hormone called melatonin, which then makes it hard to fall asleep.

Beyond recommendations for exercise, healthy diet, social contacts, and getting enough sleep, Green McDonald says, "studies have also shown that mindfulness (focused attention on one's own emotions) and other meditative practices can effectively relieve stress."

If you feel overwhelmed by stress, talk with a health care provider or mental health professional. Medications or other therapies might help you cope. In the long run, reducing stress may help you to slow down and enjoy your time with the people and activities you really care about.

TO REDUCE STRESS

- **Get enough sleep.**
- **Exercise regularly.** Just 30 minutes a day of walking can boost mood and reduce stress.
- **Build a social support network.**
- **Set priorities.** Decide what must get done and what can wait. Say no to new tasks if they are putting you into overload.
- **Think positive.** Note what you've accomplished at the end of the day, not what you've failed to do.
- **Try relaxation methods.** Mindfulness, meditation, yoga, or tai chi may help.
- **Seek help.** Talk to a mental health professional if you feel unable to cope, have suicidal thoughts, or use drugs or alcohol to cope.

